

Issue 4.3 “Was Abraham Lincoln America’s Greatest President?”

Abraham Lincoln has been made a martyr by History and elementary school teachers across the country. He is taught as one of the greatest presidents in national History, but is there truth in that statement? Phillip Shaw Paludan says yes. He argues in his book, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln*, that because Lincoln succeeded in “preserving the union and freeing the slaves” (240), Lincoln’s greatness was unmatched. On the passionately dissenting side, Melvin E. Bradford writes in *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative* that Lincoln was a sneaky politician just like any other, and who established the idea of an “imperial presidency” (240). The Civil War is one of the most studied eras in American History, but it is still difficult to determine who Lincoln was, and what his motives were.

One of the key points in deciding Lincoln’s greatness is the fact that he did, in fact, preserve the Union in its entirety. Writes Paludan, “[T]here were still thirty-six states at the end of his presidency; there might have been twenty-five...The constitutional instrument for changing governments was still in 1865 what it had been in 1861...” (242). It is also vital to remember that, because of actions influenced by or directly done by Lincoln, “4 million black Americans gained options beyond a life of slavery for themselves and their children” (242). Indeed, Lincoln’s presidency was successful in these two endeavors. However, many historians and the general populace try to separate these two achievements. Padulan’s argument in this case is that the two cannot be separated, because slavery could not exist in the Union that Republicans wanted (242).

The power to persuade is an important skill all presidents need while speaking, in order to gain support and trust in their country. Lincoln, as a lawyer, was a superior speaker, and as a

result used the idea of appealing to better angels to his advantage, though it was complicated. He grew the people's trust in him by "...not only reminding them of their aspirations but also reassuring them that their history, their lived experience, reveals legitimate paths to achieving those goals" (243). Lincoln used history, and history used Lincoln, to shape the public. These "better angels" of human nature allowed Lincoln to become someone to be emulated in how he acted and what he did by the American people. He used this mindset to mobilize the nation into supporting him and his cause, successfully keeping himself and his party in office.

Because Lincoln was so intent on remaining in office, he is sometimes classified as a "dictator." However, according to Paludan, this does not make sense. He says, "...war was about the expansion of power, and Congress also stepped forward, expanding national power, extending it's authority" (244). Even the state governments enhanced their police powers during wartime. It is natural to expand powers of the chief executive in times of crisis, so decisions could be made more quickly. Domestic authority must increase in times of war, but in general the powers of the presidency decreased post-war. Lincoln expanded powers further than ever before, but "for the rest of the century no president came within miles of Lincoln's peer or even close to Polk or Jackson for that matter" (244).

Most of the moderate Republicans wanted everything to do with Lincoln and his policies, despite the critics from the more radical Republicans. As a result, when Lincoln was assassinated, the Republican party expected Johnson and the rest of the government to continue his ideals and policies in order to retain the success of the war. Unfortunately, the reality was that Congress remained strong while "Johnson proved to not only to be slower than Lincoln to march to their goals but also to be a bitter racist obstructionist" (245). Many soldiers found it

more pertinent to follow Congressional orders rather than that of the Commander in Chief, because they knew it would be more effective in preserving what so many had given their lives for. Because Johnson was so much different from Lincoln than expected, the Tenure of Office and Command of the Army Acts were passed. These were intended to salvage what Lincoln had won by weakening presidential powers and, by default, weakening Johnson. Lincoln's primary goal was to save the Union. He did succeed in doing so, because of his "...devotion to and mastery of the political-constitutional institutions of his time" (245).

On the other hand, he can be seen as a shady politician whose interests laid only in furthering his own party and ideals on the nation. Bradford writes that, in order to understand Lincoln "we [must] devise a way of setting aside the martyrdom to look behind it at Lincoln's place in the total context of American history and discover in him a major source of our present confusion" (246). One of the most obvious downfalls of Lincoln was his dishonesty towards negroes. He had to be pro-abolitionist enough to satisfy the North, but not be so bloodthirsty for emancipation that he could be portrayed as anti-Southern. The insincerity of his position on slavery resulted in a technical freedom for African Americans, but "none of his doctrine should apply significantly to the Negro in the North" (246).

Lincoln's mismanagement of the political economy is not always necessarily connected to him, but is obviously either "under his direction or with his sponsorship" (247). The war provided a cause for Lincoln to put his own economic policies into place without too much questioning from the people. He enforced an inflationary policy, today called "income redistribution." But it was theft in 1864 and it is theft today" (247). The tariff was increased tremendously during Lincoln's presidency, as well as the formation of a national banking system.

The tariff "...stayed above 40 percent in all but two years of the period concluded with the election of Woodrow Wilson" (247). There was a National Banking Act of 1863, as well as a Legal Tender Act. Both involved pouring money not backed by specie into the economy, causing huge inflation. Lincoln supported tax graduation, which led to a bill involving the Union Pacific Railway, which resulted in the Credit Mobilier Scandal (247).

Though there is much to be said about the former president, "[T]he worst that we may say...is that he led the North in a war so as to put the domestic political priorities of his political machine ahead of the lives and the well-being of his soldiers in the field" (248). Extreme measures were taken so that the Republican party could stay in office. Voting fraud was common, when in the border states anti-Republican candidates were arrested, "soldiers whose states did not allow absentee voting were sent home by order of the President to swell Republican totals... [and] votes of Democratic soldiers were sometimes discarded as defective, replaced by Republican ballots, or simply not counted" (248). While it can be considered ridiculous to call Lincoln a dictator by some, many of his actions make the term seem legitimate. There was an almost blind following of Lincoln by Northern soldiers, and his numerous war crimes and seemingly complete disregard to essential parts of the Constitution only add evidence. Lincoln had many political enemies thrown in jail without trial, as well as arming the militia without notifying Congress. He also had a horrifying policy of "denying medicines to the South, even for the sake of Northern prisoners held behind the lines" (247).

It seems that there is no question about it, Lincoln wanted a war between the states. His intentions in 1860 and 1861 are unclear, and still debated about today. One thing is clear though, and that is his expectation that the South would rebel after his election. Unfortunately, he over

prepared for a rebellion, and thus needed a full scale revolution from the South. During his campaign for his second term, the South attempted to send “feelers” to negotiate peace. “Lincoln sought these goals, [brought forward by the peace feelers] but only on his terms. He wanted total victory. And he needed a still-resisting, impenitent Confederacy to justify his reelection” (249). Lincoln could be accused of costing hundreds of thousands of men their lives, simply because he wouldn’t negotiate unless it was in his own time. Without the war, Lincoln would never have gotten what he wanted; what he needed for was was “...some kind of passionate disorder to justify the enforcement of new Federalism...and for the voting representatives of the South to be out of their seats in the Congress” (250).

In conclusion, it is unfair to continue allowing Abraham Lincoln to be seen as a martyr. Paludan paints a picture that Americans have seen thousands of times; a great man who wanted the best for the Union and all the men in it, equality for all. “Lincoln kept his oath by leading the nation, guiding it, insisting that it keep on with the task of saving the Union and freeing the slaves...” (242), but it is not enough to completely cover the dirt beneath the surface. It is nice to think of Lincoln as the man who freed the slaves and saved the Union, but “the major charges advanced...are sufficient enough to impeach the most famous and respected of public men” (246). Much as we as Americans have been conditioned to believe that Lincoln was the greatest president in American history, his shady dealings concerning the economy, as well as his dishonesty with the African Americans he claimed to be so worried over say otherwise. Despite the Jackson presidency being long gone, Lincoln was still wholly concerned with upholding Whig ideals of an anti-Jackson government. It is clear from Bradford’s writing that keeping

himself and his party in office were far more important to Lincoln than the lives of the men serving his cause.